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Incentivizing School Turnaround

A Proposal for Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Jeremy Ayers and Melissa Lazarín April 2011

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

Large numbers of schools across the country are low performing and have been for years. This longstanding and widespread problem painfully reveals that individual schools are not the only ones responsible for their performance. The public school system as a whole is unable, and sometimes unwilling, to address the root causes of dysfunction.

Districts rapidly introduce piecemeal reforms at low-performing schools but neglect larger issues of human capital and leadership. Restrictive state policies and lack of time or expertise prevent state education agencies from effectively managing district reforms. Significant and sustained interventions, with strong support and oversight from outside of the school, are necessary to interrupt continuous cycles of underperformance.

Federal policy can play an instrumental role in rectifying the systemic failures that allow schools to flounder. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA, is a ripe opportunity to revise the law's main program that supports school improvement—the School Improvement Grant fund.

Therefore, we make four recommendations:

- Target dollars to high-need schools and districts ready to reform so that limited federal dollars make the greatest impact
- Use in-depth data to identify the interventions that districts and schools should implement to achieve maximum results
- Build the capacity of states to support school-level reform
- Construct sensible evaluation, reporting, and accountability policies that support substantial school turnaround

We agree with critics that some aspects of the current School Improvement Grant program could be improved to serve the needs of low-performing schools better. But we disagree that school improvement should be left entirely to states, due to the systemic nature of the problem. Thus, some form of school improvement must be part of a reauthorized ESEA. This paper, though not offering definitive answers, lays out clear steps the federal government can take to incentivize school turnaround.

A brief history: The No Child Left Behind Act and the School Improvement Grant Program

The most recent iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was named the No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB, and it offered a much-needed framework to distinguish underperforming schools from more successful ones. The 2002 law also required struggling schools that failed to improve to undertake one of several actions to work toward improvement—reopen as a charter school; replace all or most of the school staff who are relevant to the failure to make progress; hire a private management organization to run the school; turn over operation of the school to the state; or undergo any other major restructuring of the school’s governance. Unfortunately, the majority of schools chose the option that allows for the most flexibility—and the least significant change.¹

In Title I of ESEA lawmakers authorized a section to fund significant school improvement programs, and it was called the School Improvement Grant, or SIG, fund. SIG received funding of almost \$500 million in FY 2008, but Congress appropriated much larger sums of money for the program under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, or ARRA. SIG funding from ARRA and the regular FY 2009 appropriations reached \$3 billion.

In 2009, the Obama administration endeavored to strengthen the SIG program by increasing funding *and* targeting dollars to the lowest-achieving 5 percent of Title I schools in each state. The administration made SIG competitive within states and winnowed the menu of interventions to four—what the Department of Education considered most likely to disrupt the cycle of underperformance in schools.

The actions required for receipt of SIG dollars motivated many states and districts to radically change their approach towards low-performing schools. At the same time many districts struggled to implement the required interventions, especially while operating in a policy environment that otherwise maintained the status quo. Other districts chose not to apply at all. States voice appreciation for new funds but admit that implementing the program in districts has been challenging.²

In 2011, the Department of Education renamed SIG the School Turnaround Program. In public remarks President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have prioritized turning around low-performing schools as part of reauthorizing ESEA. In March, President Obama praised Miami Central High School, a SIG-funded school, saying: “You’re doing what I challenged states to do shortly after I took office, and that’s turning America’s lowest-performing schools around. This is something that hasn’t received as much attention as it should. But it could hardly be more important to our country.”³

The time to act is now

Regardless of political affiliation, educators and the public realize that struggling schools need significant attention if they are to improve substantially. Therefore, we encourage Congress to make the rapid improvement of America's lowest-performing schools a priority in the reauthorization of ESEA. As Congress approaches this task, it must ensure that school improvement efforts are not isolated from other important reforms in the law. The Turnaround program should be part of a comprehensive education reform law that addresses teacher and principal effectiveness, standards and assessments, accountability systems, data collection, and state and district management practices.

Grounding turnaround policy in a robust federal accountability system is crucial because accountability policies help identify schools for improvement, inform the actions necessary for improvement, and provide political cover and incentives (even if negative) for making substantial headway on outcomes. Spelling out a new federal accountability policy is beyond the scope of this paper. But we believe improvement and accountability go hand-in-hand, and we urge Congress to hold states, districts, and schools accountable for turning around all schools, not just their lowest-performing ones.

RECOMMENDATION #1

Target dollars to high-need schools and districts ready to reform

Federal policy has an historic mission to redress inequity, so it makes sense that the chief factor in receiving turnaround funds should be a school's need based on poverty. Need, however, should also be defined by underperformance since the goal of the turnaround program is to raise student achievement and outcomes like graduation rates. Therefore, we believe a new school turnaround program should continue to target the lowest-achieving 5 percent of Title-I eligible schools in each state, including high schools with graduation rates below 60 percent.

Congress should allocate turnaround grants to states based on demonstrated need and a record of underperformance.

We recommend that school turnaround grants target any school and its district that is eligible for, even if not receiving, Title I dollars and:

- Is deemed “chronically underperforming” by the state. This determination will be based on performance on state assessments in math and reading/English language arts, and graduation rates, as explained in a state’s application for turnaround funding.
- Demonstrates chronic underperformance in the “all students” group as well as achievement gaps between major student sub-groups.
- Ensures that high schools that have low graduation rates (60 percent or less) have equitable access to turnaround grants. The state can reserve a portion of funds for high schools or award priority points to districts that include high schools in their applications.⁴

States should go a step further in determining and reporting student need so that the picture is clear what federal funds are being used to address. Case study research has shown that comprehensive needs assessments should include:⁵

- Actual performance level for students and subgroups of students scoring below proficient on state tests
 - Disability level and whether students receive special education services within their general education classes or through separate resource classes
 - The concentration of students across languages
 - The level of English proficiency for English language learners
 - Student mobility
 - The number of students in various risk categories, including extreme poverty and foster care
-

States should competitively award turnaround grants to districts that demonstrate the strongest commitment and capacity to reform.

The federal government can maximize the impact of its turnaround dollars by targeting funds to low-performing schools in districts that are also ready to reform.⁶ Federal policy should leverage turnaround dollars to encourage district-level reform and thereby spend federal money in a way that is expected to yield results. Unfortunately, in the previous administration of SIG less than a third of schools chose one of the bolder models (turnaround, restart, or closure).⁷ Therefore, districts should be prioritized for funding based on their commitment to and capacity for reform including:

- **Human capital:** the extent to which the district has developed a strong human capital system. Districts must be able to show that they have a sufficient pool of effective educators to staff schools and a comprehensive plan to recruit and retain effective teachers and leaders in low-performing schools. Further, districts should use evaluation systems, based in part on student achievement data, to differentiate, reward, and improve teaching and school leadership.
- **Support for reform:** the level of support among stakeholders. Support can be demonstrated by memoranda of understanding between district management and the local teachers' unions or proposed changes to collective bargaining agreements. Districts should also demonstrate a history of implementing bold reforms and a willingness to make politically difficult decisions.
- **Flexibility:** the extent to which principals enjoy sufficient operational flexibility in staffing, scheduling, and budgeting to implement aggressive improvement plans. Districts must provide support and freedom to school leaders in a way that makes turnaround schools a choice, even preferred, place to work.

- **Data systems:** the ability of the school and district to use student data systems to drive decision-making and target resources. States can be of substantial help to districts in making state-wide data more accessible and user friendly, and districts are responsible for ensuring schools have time and talent to review data so that it informs turnaround efforts.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Identify the interventions that will make the greatest impact

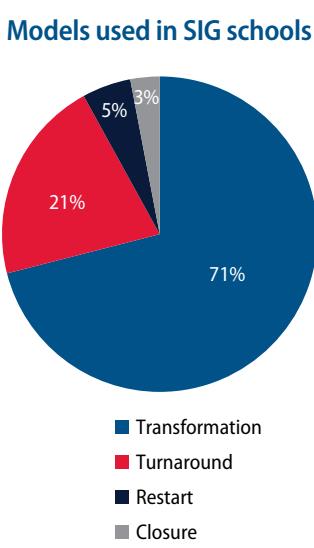
The Center on Education Policy's multiyear case study research of school improvement efforts in six states found that schools that improved academic achievement and exited NCLB's restructuring phase used a variety of strategies, indicating that there is "no silver-bullet" intervention strategy.⁸ Yet some common practices did emerge among schools that were successful at exiting restructuring.

All but one of the schools, for example, that exited restructuring replaced at least some school staff. Approximately half of the schools that did not exit restructuring also replaced school staff, but unlike their more successful counterparts, these schools lacked the capacity and support to effectively rehire new staff and overcome the staff shortage. Therefore, some staff replacement coupled with adequate capacity and technical assistance to staff these schools is important.

The interventions required under the first SIG grants incorporated many of the best practices of successful school turnarounds, including principal and staff replacement, a focus on innovative academic strategies such as expanding learning time, as well as providing federal policy support for school closure. Only one intervention, the transformation model, did not require significant change in school leadership or management. Recent data from the Department of Education and independent researchers reveal that the majority of schools are choosing the transformation model.⁹ This statistic demonstrates the continued reluctance of districts to adopt more dramatic reforms at low-performing schools.

Hard-line reformers have worried that the SIG program does not sufficiently induce districts to take on substantial reforms. Other critics have argued the four SIG models are too prescriptive and too difficult to implement in rural areas where actions like replacing a majority of staff may be implausible.

Therefore, a revised turnaround program should offer schools and districts both adequate flexibility to tailor interventions to their local context as well as sufficient incentives to use more dramatic—perhaps more politically difficult—reforms.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, *School Turnaround* 1 (3) (2010).

Districts and schools, for example, that agree to take on more significant reform could receive reduced-reporting requirements, priority for receiving funds, or even additional dollars as long as they hit significant growth targets.¹⁰ Or districts and schools should be allowed to use their existing improvement strategies, or newly proposed strategies of their own, as long as they have demonstrated substantial growth in student achievement.

The turnaround strategies we recommend for low-performing schools are also characteristic of high-performing schools and districts, including those in other countries. The world's highest-performing school systems, such as Singapore and Finland, place a significant emphasis on recruiting their country's leading talent and retaining them in the classroom.¹¹ It is therefore no surprise that establishing a pipeline to recruit new teachers and leaders is one of the strategies that we recommend below.

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Districts should adopt an intervention strategy for turnaround schools that is based upon a data-driven needs assessment and incorporates feedback from stakeholders.

We recommend that turnaround schools and districts select intervention strategies that include one of the following:

- Closing the school and re-enrolling students in a higher-achieving school within the district
- Closing the school and restarting it under the management of a charter school operator, charter school management organization, or an education management organization
- Agreeing to a set of transformation requirements that include screening staff for effectiveness using rigorous evaluation systems, replacing ineffective principals and teachers with effective ones, and developing reward systems for attracting and retaining highly effective principals and teachers
- Employing an existing strategy that has demonstrated success at the school or a new strategy that has demonstrated success in similar contexts. Success is defined as making at least a 10 percent increase in student achievement in math and reading/English language arts in one year

In addition, we recommend that districts adopt the following policies to facilitate the success of the required-intervention strategies:

- Instituting mutual consent policies for schools receiving turnaround grants. A highly effective staff is a necessary component of a school turnaround strategy. Therefore, principals must have the ability to choose their staff, and teachers that do not wish to remain in a turnaround school have the option to leave their position.
- Establishing partnerships, when practicable, with an external provider. Around the country, examples of successful school turnaround have found that an external management organization is integral to providing support and accountability for a struggling school or clusters of schools.¹²
- Ensuring students enrolling in low-performing elementary schools have access to quality pre-school programs. Students in chronically underperforming elementary schools most likely start kindergarten underprepared and unready. Decades of research demonstrate that high-quality pre-school programs can improve students' academic performance and life outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Boost state capacity to support school turnaround

Schools do not operate in isolation from the districts and states in which they are located. Dysfunctional schools often operate in dysfunctional districts, monitored by states that lack the ability to intervene. Under NCLB, states were empowered to take over low-performing schools, but the law did little to increase state capacity to perform this role or to be strategic in turnaround efforts.¹³ Case studies have shown that many states do not have the capacity or legal authority to manage low-performing schools.¹⁴

We know, however, that state education agencies and school districts are instrumental to creating an environment in which turnaround reforms can exist.¹⁵ Turnaround funds can be used as an incentive to change state and district policies so that they support school turnaround.

State applications should be evaluated on criteria that demonstrate the state's legal, statutory, or regulatory authority to foster reform.

In reviewing state applications for turnaround grants, the Department of Education should evaluate the extent to which the state has the legal, statutory, or regulatory authority to:¹⁶

- Support human-capital reforms integral to turnaround. An evaluation of this criteria may include one or more of the following:
 - Identifying statutory or regulatory barriers, to removing ineffective principals or teachers from turnaround schools.
 - Assuring that removal of ineffective staff will not negatively impact other schools.
 - Identifying statutory or regulatory barriers to providing principals discretion over staff, schedule, budget, and programs that are part of turnaround plans.
- Ensure the state or district has the ability to hire external partners, if needed, to support turnaround efforts.

- Intervene directly in the management of low-performing schools. States need the flexibility to create innovative management structures for failing schools, including the reassignment of turnaround schools to a state-managed district.
- Ensure the state or district can provide access to quality pre-school programs for students enrolling in low-performing elementary schools.

State applications should be evaluated based on their ability and commitment to build district capacity through principal and teacher training, collect turnaround data, cluster turnaround schools, and create state turnaround offices.

In reviewing state applications for turnaround grants, the Department of Education should evaluate state applications based on their commitment to:

- Develop pipelines of teachers and leaders trained for turnaround schools
- Collect and report turnaround data
- Encourage the clustering of turnaround schools
- Build state office capacity for turnaround

Let's examine each of these evaluation guidelines briefly in turn.

Develop pipelines of teachers and leaders trained for turnaround schools
Sustained improvement at a chronically underperforming school can only be created with the leadership of a strong principal and strong teaching by a cadre of effective teachers. Because staff replacement is often necessary to jumpstart school improvement, districts need access to a pipeline of effective leaders and teachers. States can assist districts in this effort by working with institutions of higher education or nonprofits with demonstrated success to develop training programs and revise licensure requirements that limit potential candidates. The Virginia Department of Education, for example, has a partnership with the University of Virginia that trains and provides high-performing principals for the state's lowest-performing schools.

Collect and report turnaround data

States with more sophisticated data systems are in a better position to enhance turnaround efforts because they can provide information that drives reform. Public stakeholders are more likely to support turnaround with time, money, and

political support when they have clear data about low-performing schools and what states plan to do about them. Illinois, for example, published the applications of both funded and unfunded districts competing for grants. Successful states also set clear benchmarks for school turnaround, supply administrators with regular feedback on their progress, and provide assistance in retooling improvement plans based on data.

Encourage the clustering of turnaround schools

Persistently low-performing schools can operate in isolation in a higher-performing district or may share more similarities with schools in another part of the state. This allows the state to oversee all turnaround schools under a state office and helps provide rural schools with support their district may not be able to provide. Some states, such as Tennessee and Louisiana, have created districts consisting of low-performing schools. In a largely rural context, Idaho has used federal SIG money to create a network of support for the lowest-performing schools and districts in the state.¹⁷ Large school districts have also clustered their low-performing schools in places like New York City, Miami-Dade, Chicago, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Regardless of location creating turnaround clusters facilitates pooled resources, exchange of best practices, increased leverage with external providers, and a streamlined approach to management.

Build state office capacity for turnaround

State-to-district assistance is a key lever for improving the ability of districts to turn around their schools, but most state education agencies, or SEAs, lack the capacity or capital to do so. Some SEAs, such as those in Colorado and Maryland, have created specific departments focused on school turnaround.¹⁸ Such offices help districts in identifying low-performing schools, setting benchmarks for and collecting data on school progress, securing and administering complex grants, and partnering with external providers. SEA turnaround offices can also spearhead efforts to align state policies and regulations with turnaround reforms. SEAs, for example, could provide districts more flexibility in personnel policies, streamline the procurement process, or create incentives for districts and schools to take on dramatic reform, such as reducing reporting requirements or giving priority in receiving funds. Some innovative states could even negotiate separate collective bargaining agreements for their turnaround schools.

States should continue to monitor and support low-performing schools that do not receive turnaround grants.

Since turnaround funds are allocated through a competitive process from states to districts, states should be required to report in future applications how non-turnaround schools, or eligible-but-not-receiving schools, are being supported to improve achievement. States can help non-turnaround schools by implementing early warning indicator systems that notify a moderately low-performing school when it is in danger of slipping into severe underperformance. Such systems rely on regularly collected data to flag problems—correlated to school failure—but also provide guidance in how to address identified problems before they get out of hand. Setting benchmarks for progress, incentivizing significant (not gradual) reform, and holding the line on accountability are crucial to supporting turnaround efforts. But they are also helpful for all schools and should be part of any state-accountability plan.

RECOMMENDATION #4

Hold all parties accountable for progress

Under NCLB, schools have largely borne the burden of turning themselves around. But improving schools is a shared effort and one that will likely be unsuccessful without the full support of the district and state education agency. In return for receiving federal turnaround grants, schools should be held accountable for demonstrating gains in academic achievement and other indicators of school improvement. Districts and states should also be held accountable for holding up their end of the bargain to provide schools with necessary support and resources.

Evaluating participating schools, districts, and states is crucial because rigorous research on turnarounds is limited. Evaluations can help inform a wide array of school reform efforts since effective turnaround requires, among other things, a robust human capital system, an effective and responsive longitudinal data system, and efficient use of learning time.

Congress should require states to set benchmarks and performance targets for each school receiving turnaround funds.

Schools deserve to know up front what the state expects them to accomplish and what rewards or consequences ensue. Accountability policies—at least ones that are fair and transparent—clearly articulate in advance what annual achievement targets low-performing schools must meet, including explicit interim steps (or benchmarks) necessary to reach those targets. In setting targets and benchmarks, Congress should establish some parameters or require state plans to be approved by the Department of Education. That way states are challenged and required to set bold goals. Regardless of the means, the federal government has a vested interest in ensuring its resources are spent on significant growth in school improvement.

Congress should require states and districts to collect and to report data that informs turnaround efforts. Turnaround data should include, at a minimum, “leading indicators” and “core indicators.”

Dramatic gains in academic achievement and graduation rates may be elusive within the first one or two years of turnaround. But successful schools do show progress on other “leading indicators” such as increased attendance rates, reduced discipline problems, or an increase in students completing advanced coursework. Leading indicators of school improvement reveal whether or not a school’s intervention strategy is on target to increase achievement and graduation gains. Leading indicators should offer timely prognostic data, stimulate process changes at the school and district level, be aligned with and predictive of outcome data, and be measurable.¹⁹

Therefore, we recommend states require districts and schools to track the following leading indicators, which derive from research and lessons learned from successful school turnarounds:²⁰

- Student attendance rate
- Number and percentage of students completing advanced coursework (Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate) and/or the number and percentage of students enrolled in dual enrollment or early college high schools
- Student participation rate on state assessments in reading/English language arts and mathematics, for all students and for each student subgroup
- Dropout rate
- Discipline incidents
- Teacher attendance rate
- Distribution of teachers by performance level on a district’s teacher evaluation system
- Reduction in the percentage of students in the bottom level of achievement on state assessments in reading/English language arts and math

Demonstrated progress on a school’s leading indicators should not be confused with actual gains in academic achievement, however. Congress must ultimately hold schools, districts, and states accountable for demonstrating growth on core indicators, including improved performance on state assessments and increased graduation rates. Successful school turnaround should yield results on core indicators by year three of reform.

Therefore, we recommend states require districts and schools to track, at a minimum, the following core academic achievement indicators:

- Percentage of students at or above each proficiency level (basic, proficient, advanced) on state assessments in reading/English language arts and mathematics, by grade and by student subgroup
- Progress toward core academic benchmarks as determined under ESEA's new accountability system including which targets were met and missed
- Average scale scores on state assessments in reading/English language arts and in mathematics, by grade, for the "all students" group, for each achievement quartile, and for each subgroup
- Percentage of English language learner students who attain English language proficiency on the state's summative language assessments
- Graduation rate for the "all students" group and for each subgroup
- College enrollment rate for the "all students" group and for each subgroup

Such information serves more than a compliance function; it provides guidance when a school misses its goal so that problems are accurately diagnosed. Further, experience has shown that states must be clear in spelling out reporting requirements up front, but also clear about what consequences follow poor performance. Colorado and Louisiana signed memoranda of understanding with state and district staff in the SIG program to ensure accountability was understood and shared by all.²¹

The federal government should hold schools, districts, and states accountable for achieving results.

Accountability works best when it is shared by all parties who play a role in educating students including schools, districts, and states. And the best accountability systems recognize positive outcomes and establish smart but fair consequences for failing to improve. As previously noted in this paper, accountability for turnaround schools should fit within, or be compatible with, a larger accountability framework under a new ESEA. Therefore, we recommend that Congress consider the following as they debate how best to hold parties accountable for improving schools:

- **School accountability.** If a turnaround school demonstrates improvement—based on core academic achievement—within three years, we recommend districts reward the school with another two-year grant. Additional funds help a school maintain progress and build sustainability so that it does not fall back into underperformance.

On the other hand, if a school fails to demonstrate improvement in three years, states should require districts to select a new intervention model or to retool the school’s existing model based on a data-driven needs assessment.²² Districts could also restart the school as a charter school, or close the school indefinitely and transfer all students to a higher-performing school in the area.

- **District accountability.** States can hold districts accountable through monitoring and oversight of the turnaround plan, ensuring benchmarks and performance targets are met in a timely fashion. Ultimately, a state should revoke a district’s set-aside funds, under the turnaround program, if a majority of its schools do not make adequate progress.
- **State accountability.** The federal government should hold states accountable for their role in providing oversight and guidance to underperforming districts and schools. Experience has shown that states should clearly articulate in advance what is expected of turnaround schools in terms of reporting, meeting benchmarks, and what consequences ensue when progress is not made.²³ States failing to do so should lose a portion of their set-aside funds under the turnaround program. Furthermore, states that lack a strong record of turning around schools—those in which a majority of their turnaround schools fail to improve after three years—should lose an additional portion of their set-aside funds until substantial improvement occurs.

Conclusion

Chronically low-performing schools often, if not always, operate in tandem with district, state, and federal education systems that exacerbate school-level problems. Therefore, if our country is to educate every child to high levels, then federal, state, and district policies must align to support school turnaround. Congress has a unique opportunity in this reauthorization of ESEA to prioritize struggling schools and to foster substantial, dramatic reform at every level.

Congress faces a dilemma in reauthorizing ESEA. On one hand, a large percentage of schools are identified as low-performing, and that proportion is expected to grow each year. Policymakers and schools must take action to avert a crisis by fixing the accountability and turnaround systems accordingly. On the other hand, revising a large, complex federal law such as ESEA will take strong bipartisan leadership and willingness for members of Congress to work across the aisle. Such cooperation has been difficult to muster so far during the budget debates of the 112th Congress.

Congress can and must find the political will to reauthorize ESEA soon, as hard as it may be to find bipartisanship. In March president Obama called on Congress to revise federal education law by the beginning of the new school year.²⁴ As ambitious as that timeline may be, it is possible and, more importantly, necessary.” Our nation’s students deserve to start school in the fall knowing the country has made a fresh commitment to improving their schools.

Endnotes

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- 6 Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, “School Improvement Grants: Take 2” (2010).
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- 8 Center on Education Policy, “Improving Low-Performing Schools: Lessons from Five Years of Studying School Restructuring under No Child Left Behind” (2009).
- 9 U.S. Department of Education, “School Turnaround”: Center on Education Policy, “Early State Implementation of Title I School Improvement Grants Under the Recovery Act.”
- 10 Some reporting requirements are essential and should not be reduced. Such requirements include, among others, reporting core and leading academic indicators as described in this paper. However, some reporting requirements may be duplicative or less “essential” to improving student performance and access to educational opportunities. Those requirements could be loosened or eliminated to reduce burdens placed on low-performing schools.
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- 21 Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, “School Improvement Grants: Take 2.”
- 22 Ibid. See also Center on Education Policy, “Improving Low-performing Schools.”
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- 24 “Remarks by the President on Education in Arlington, Virginia” March 14, 2011. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/14/remarks-president-education-arlington-virginia>.

About the authors

Jeremy Ayers is a Senior Education Policy analyst at the Center for American Progress where he focuses on advancing the Center's federal policy agenda, including issues of teacher and principal effectiveness, school improvement, and fiscal equity. Prior to joining the Center, Ayers was a classroom teacher and before that a policy analyst for the Alliance for Excellent Education, a national high school reform organization. He holds a master's degree from Duke University and a bachelor of arts from McMurry University in his home state of Texas.

Melissa Lazarín is an independent educational consultant. She is the former associate director of education policy at the Center for American Progress. Prior to joining the Center, she served as director of education policy at First Focus and as associate director of education policy at the National Council of La Raza.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the Center for American Progress staff who contributed to the writing of this report, particularly Saba Bireda.

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